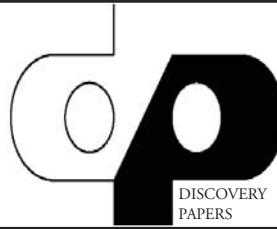


POLITICS: HOW TO ENGAGE GOVERNMENT

SERIES: THE SKIPPING STONE OF THE SPIRIT



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1 Timothy 2:1-4
Romans 13:1-7
3rd Message
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Last week we talked about the issue of global poverty. We talked about many of the different ways that the Spirit might lead us to get involved with addressing this issue. One of those ways was by changing the system—helping to address the issues that cause poverty rather than helping those who are already in poverty. But as soon as you start talking about changing the system, you start talking about governments and economic policy and legislation and international relationships. And that brings you into the realm of politics.

This can be a tricky realm for a lot of Christians. How are we, as followers of Christ, supposed to engage in the political sphere? Well, to address that question, let's start by thinking about what government can and can't do. What is the role of government in our world?

To help us think about this from a cultural perspective, I want us to consider a scene from the movie, *Munich*.¹ This scene is of a fictional representation of events during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. A militant group has just murdered a group of Israeli athletes and the Israeli government is struggling to figure out how to respond to these events. Through the process of pained discussion the Israeli government decides to do something outside of their power. They feel they have no other option than to strike back, even if it goes against their own honored laws. "Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its values," says the Prime Minister. You can see the government pushing up against its bounds, stretching its limits. We observe that at times government is not enough. The government exists by following a set of rules, by doing what a government is allowed to do. But in this movie, something terrible has happened and following the rules isn't good enough. So they choose to act in secret, violating their own laws in order to respond to this painful situation. We'll find that even within our culture, there is an acknowledgement that sometimes government is not enough. We need something bigger. But when there is nothing bigger, the only route is to operate outside the law and this is exactly what the Israelis chose to do.

We, however, know something they don't. We know of something bigger. We know of God and His kingdom.

What we're trying to figure out this morning is how does that change the way we are involved with government and politics. Because we know there is something more, we know we should act differently. But how?

In order to address that question, we're going to be following the pattern that we've been using for this series. We're following the Spirit like a skipping stone as He skips across time. We'll start by looking at two different passages in Scripture that address how to interact with government. They will show us two slightly different angles. Then we'll follow the Spirit through church history and look at a significant political crisis in the fifth century. We'll see how one of the church fathers dealt with a complicated political situation in his day. Finally, we'll move forward and ask what this means for us today.

I hope we'll see some basic principles that will help us to worship the God of the universe and interact with the government of this earth.

Serve God *through* Politics

We're going to start by looking at a passage addressed to the Romans. This comes near the end of this book and throughout the book Paul has been talking about the new work that God has done. He has been emphasizing the spiritual life that all believers have access to. Paul's been telling them about that "something more:" a new creation, a new kingdom, and a new way of living. But then he remembers that they still live in Rome and have to wake up and go to work in the morning. So he tells them how to go about it.

Romans 13:1-7:

¹Everyone must submit himself to the

governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. ⁴For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. ⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

With all of Paul's talk about the new kingdom of God, the believers in Rome could have started thinking that the old kingdom of man didn't matter anymore. But Paul says otherwise. In fact, he says something that is pretty radical. He says that government—the government that has at times and will again in the future try to kill them—is established by God. He tells these Christians to submit to the government. And that rebelling against them is, in essence, rebelling against God. He concludes by discussing taxes because paying taxes is one of the most practical ways to submit to government. You may remember Jesus addressing the same issue.

Paul says two very important things in this passage. First, he affirms that God is in charge. He is the ultimate authority. God is the one establishing other authorities in this passage. God's at the top. But He's given His power to earthly government. God uses government to serve His purposes. This doesn't necessarily mean that government always serves His purposes well. But that is how God establishes it.

From this passage, we can think about government as a hammer. God is the one who holds this hammer. He uses it to do His work. Hammers are powerful tools, but they are tools. God is ultimately the powerful one. But He's using the tool of government. The government's power

comes from God. He uses government to do His will.

How does that help us answer the question of how to engage in politics as Christians? Well, some hammers are better than others. If you've ever used a flimsy hammer or one with a loose head, you know that it can be really hard to use if effectively. We can work to make the hammer better so God's purposes are more effectively carried out. In our particular governmental scheme, there are lots of opportunities to make the hammer better. We can run for office, we can vote for candidates and measures, we can get involved with reform groups, and we can volunteer our time. We have a participatory government. We can help this hammer work better and we can serve God through politics.

Remember the scene in the movie *Munich*? Remember how they needed something more than government to accomplish their purposes? As Christians we acknowledge that there is something else. There is another realm. There is God's kingdom. And we live in that other kingdom. But we also live here, in the kingdom of man. And Paul says that man's kingdom exercises the authority of God's kingdom. For the most part, God chooses to work through government, not around it.

This is one of the things about Christianity that made it so radical for its day. It mattered what you did here. Most of the religions of that day were either all about the political sphere or they completely ignored it. Either you worshipped the Emperor and politics was your religion; or you believed that you could escape earthly reality into some mystical spiritual experience. But Christianity says that you have a spiritual experience here by submitting to government.

So taking political action can be a deeply spiritual activity, when you vote, when you decide your opinion on a ballot measure, when you run for office, when you contribute to a campaign, or when you sign a petition. You can serve God by doing these things. You are trying to ensure that the hammer hits its mark. That the tool God has chosen to exercise His authority does a good job at it.

So there is a close relationship between God's authority and government. It's almost like they are intertwined. If this were all there was, you might think that government and God were always in line with each other. You might start to think they were one and the same.

Serve God *over* Politics

But as we keep reading in the New Testament, the relationship between God's kingdom and man's kingdom seems to be defined a little better. Around ten years after he wrote Romans, Paul wrote another letter. This letter was addressed directly to a man whom he had left responsible for the church in Ephesus: Timothy. In the second chapter of 1 Timothy, Paul again brings up the issue of government, but this time he takes a bit of a different twist.

1 Timothy 2:1-4:

¹I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

So this time Paul is addressing the issue slightly differently. He's not telling people to obey the government, he's telling them to pray for the leaders in government. And again, let's notice what Paul implies by this command. When you pray for someone, you are acknowledging that there is a higher authority out there. When you pray for the president, you acknowledge that there is something bigger than him. Praying for government leaders says something powerful about their position. It says that they exist under God. That's the same thing we saw in the last passage.

But this is an interesting passage. Because the people in Ephesus are told to pray for the government so that they can live peaceful and quiet lives. In some ways, this builds on what Paul said earlier. The role of the government is to create peace; to keep things running smoothly; to establish a functional society so that people can go about their lives.

But the reasoning given in 1 Timothy is about more than just living a peaceful life. It's about more than building roads so that I can get to the grocery store safely and efficiently. Paul starts talking about the gospel and how God desires all men to be able to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. So in the context of the passage,

the reason we are to pray for government is so that the kingdom of God may grow. Government creates a peaceful society so that the gospel can spread. Government builds roads and airports and all that, not just so I can live my life, but so the gospel can spread throughout the world.

And now we see something different about government. From the first passage we saw that the government can be the route that God chooses to exercise His authority. The connection was very close. But now there is more of a distinction. In fact, Paul says to pray for the government of man so that the competing government of God can grow up under its roof.

Let's pretend for a moment that you live on an island in the South Pacific. There are a few thousand other people that live on this island with you. And let's say, just for argument's sake, that you're the king of this island. You're a pretty good king. You've built some roads, established some villages, and helped everyone to be safe. Your island is a good place to live. Now let's say that one of your trusted advisors comes up to you and tells you something disturbing. He tells you that one of your subjects is gathering an army of people together. He is using the roads that you built on this island to travel to the different villages and recruit people. He's using community centers to gather the groups and explain his vision for a new way to live. He's even using the money that you've printed, the bills that have your face on them to buy food for people that aren't getting fed. It's almost as if everything you've done as king of this island has been done so this guy can establish his people.

That's the force of what Paul is saying: the role of the government in this world is to make a productive society in which Jesus Christ can assemble His kingdom. Do you realize that many of the words we use to address God are political words. We call Jesus Lord—that's a political term. We call God King—that's the ultimate ruler of a government. We talk about God as Ruler and Protector and Savior—these are all political ideas. So is it any wonder why at times the government of this world has acted violently towards Christians? If I were king of that island, I might just send my troops to wipe this guy out in case he proves to be a threat.

If from the first passage, we imagined government to be a hammer, now we might imagine government to be an umbrella. The first passage said government was a tool that served God's purposes. This passage implies that

government makes it easier for God's kingdom to grow until that day when God's kingdom overturns it. Think about the rain as the sin and brokenness of mankind. Government exists to protect us from that; to shelter us from raw evil. And that shelter allows the kingdom of God to grow up under it.

So what does that mean for us to engage in government? This passage helps us to see the distinction between the kingdom of God and government. To realize that the really important thing is the kingdom of God and it will ultimately prevail. We can make the umbrella bigger. We can make it look prettier. We can make it cover more people, provide more shelter. But an umbrella can't stop the rain. It only protects you from it. Government can't fix our brokenness. It can only help us to live together as broken people. Some day the rain will stop. And the umbrella will be worthless.

From the first passage, we saw that we can serve God through politics. We can get involved in government to do God's will. But we can't lose sight of the fact that government is just an umbrella protecting the real kingdom as the real King expands His reign. We can't put politics above God. So we need to serve God over politics.

One of the amazing ways that God has worked in history is how He prepared the world for Jesus to come. How the Greco-Roman Empire established trade routes, a common language, and safe passage throughout a vast part of the world. So that when Jesus came, His message could be carried safely throughout the region. Think about Paul walking on Roman roads, writing in the language that they made universal, sharing the gospel message of a new King. This has happened in other ways too. Think about Western government in the 17th and 18th centuries as imperialism caught on and people were sent out to faraway places, bringing the gospel with them. Think about living in the United States where we have freedom of religion and can share the good news of Jesus Christ without any fear of reprisal. Government is an umbrella that makes it easier for the gospel to be spread.

As we participate in our political system, we cannot make the mistake of equating God's purposes with political action. God is bigger. Something bigger than government is being bred in the lives and communities of God's people all across the world. A new kind of reign that will make politics useless. So get involved in politics, hoping to see God's purposes served through it, but always remember

that God's purposes are ultimately bigger than politics.

Don't Confuse God and Government: St. Augustine and *City of God*

We're not the only ones to be confused by this. For the first 250 years after Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity was a rebellious counter-cultural sect that was persecuted on and off by the Roman government. They were outsiders. Political nobodies. They had no power.

But then something amazing happened. Something no one expected. Rome's attitude toward Christianity changed. It softened. In 311 A.D., an edict was written which made it legal to be a Christian. It basically said, "If Christians are stupid enough to believe that Jesus is God, let's not make their life any harder by persecuting them; as long as they don't cause trouble, leave them be." The edict called this an "indulgence:" a favor granted to stupid people. In return for this favor, the edict said that Christians should do the following:

Wherefore, for this our indulgence, they ought to pray to their God for our safety, for that of the republic, and for their own, that the commonwealth may continue uninjured on every side, and that they may be able to live securely in their homes.²

Now, that sounds a lot like Paul's instruction to the people of Ephesus 250 years earlier: pray for government leaders so everyone can live peaceful lives. The attitude of the Empire changed. You hold your hand out and think: "Maybe the rain stopped. Maybe God's kingdom arrived!"

And sure enough, a year later, the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. This was a huge deal. The leader of the Empire was a Christian. The next year, in 313 he issued the "Edict of Milan," which restored even more rights of Christians. The whole fourth century was marked by Christians gaining more and more legitimacy in the Empire until finally in 380, Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. If you were living during those times, you wouldn't have believed it. You might have thought that you were living in the days of God's kingdom on earth. You might have held your hand outside the umbrella and thought the rain had stopped.

But not for long. Because soon after this, in 410, something unthinkable happened. The Visigoths, a barbarian tribe, entered Rome and sacked it. The city was destroyed. This was the first time in almost 800 years that Rome had been conquered. St. Jerome, who lived in Rome, had this to say, “The city which had conquered the whole world was itself conquered ...” This event caused confusion all over the Roman world. How could such a thing have happened? People claimed that this was punishment from the ancient gods of Rome because they had converted to Christianity. In 100 years, the Empire had gone from open hostility towards Christianity to officially Christian and everyone was confused.

The Christians in particular were very confused. They thought that the Roman Empire became the kingdom of God, but then Rome was destroyed. That didn't make sense. So a man who lived during that time wrote a book which became one of the most influential books of church history. The book is called *The City of God*.³ It was written by Augustine of Hippo, also known as St. Augustine. I first heard about St. Augustine when I moved to Texas, because he's so famous, all the grass in Texas is called “St. Augustine” grass.

Augustine spent 20 years writing this book to help people understand what was going on. In it, he described what we've called the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. He called them the city of man and the city of God. He wrote that each of these cities exists at the same time, but they aren't the same. And eventually the city of God will overcome the city of man. He wrote a detailed history of these two cities starting with Adam and Eve and their sons. He described how each city got its start and how each city will have its end. But his major point was to counter the idea that arose when the Roman Empire became Christian. It's a simple point, but has been frequently forgotten throughout the history of the church: the city of man is not the city of God. The hammer is not the builder. The umbrella is not the one holding it. Don't confuse God and government.

He said that you can't think the whole Empire becomes Christian and the city of man becomes the city of God just because Constantine became a Christian. These are two different cities. And even when the city of man supposedly professes Christian faith, it does not become God's kingdom. That will only happen at the end of the age. He insisted that the city of man would never become the city of God because it is always opposed to God, even when it seems to be on His side. The city of man won't

become the city of God; it will be overthrown by the city of God.

This was a critical lesson for the church to learn. Unfortunately, it was easily forgotten. The Roman Empire lasted another several centuries and became incredibly intertwined with the church so that most people saw very little distinction between God and government. That's why it was called the Holy Roman Empire. After the Reformation, some pilgrims came to North America to set up a new civilization and they got confused about it again, they thought that their city of man was actually the city of God. We'll talk more about them in a few weeks. And in our generation, sometimes people talk about America being a Christian nation in a way that sounds like they are confusing the city of man with the city of God. We need to understand the point that Augustine spent twenty years trying to explain. There is no such thing as a “Christian nation.” The city of man is always the city of man and we can't confuse it with the city of God.

Be A Passionate Realist

So then how do we live in the city of man? We looked at two different passages. From Romans, we thought of government as a hammer: a tool that God uses. We talked about serving God *through* politics. In 1 Timothy the passage said that we should pray for government so the gospel may grow. We thought of government as an umbrella sheltering the kingdom of God from the rain. We talked about serving God *over* politics. Then we heard about a long lost brother of ours from a millennium and a half ago who attempted to clear up the confusion about God and government. So now we try to answer the question about today.

The reason people go into politics is to make things better. They see a problem and they want to fix it. Vote for me because I'll fix the economy, improve our schools, lower your taxes, or something. Everybody promises change. No one runs for office on a platform of “things are running smoothly; elect me to keep the steering wheel pointed straight ahead.” This is because things always need to be improved.

There is a lot of good that can be done through politics. God's purposes can be served. If you want to

affect economic policies for the sake of the poor, politics is one way to do that. If you want to change how your city develops low-income housing, politics is the route to go. If you want to weigh in on the issue of immigration, politics is the way to do it.

We need to be passionate about seeing God's purposes carried out through our government. If God put the authority in place and it serves as His representative, as Paul said in Romans, then we can do our part to help that representation be more accurate. We can make sure that the cause of orphans, widows, and aliens is well addressed by our government systems. We can work towards an understanding of marriage that serves God's purposes. We can try to relate to the rest of the world in a way that honors God. We can engage in these things passionately and whole-heartedly.

But we cannot confuse God and government. We cannot forget that earthly government will eventually give way to the kingdom of God. Jesus will be our King. We belong to Christ first and only then to our nationality. We must not forget that Jesus is the one who will bring in the perfect government. That we will rule alongside of Him. That our political position is ultimately one of spiritual authority, not civil influence. We live in a broken world of sin and selfishness. Our political involvement is not going to change that. So we need to be realists about what we can expect from the kingdom of man and remember to wait in hope for the kingdom of God.

So what we need are passionate realists. We need to make the hammer better, but not believe that the hammer is all there is. We need to hold the umbrella, make it bigger, protect more people, but never think that the umbrella will stop the rain. Be passionately engaged, but be realistic. Be a passionate realist.

The problem is that these are really hard people to find. I know lots of passionate people. They are excited about their cause. They are absolutely convinced that their cause will save the world. They spend all their energy talking about it, thinking about it, and trying to get other people to talk about it and think about it. Their faith leads them to want to change things and make things better.

These are great people to be around. They bring energy and life to a community. They focus efforts on things that are worthwhile. They help us to get motivated to act, something that we are often slow to do. Many of us

would prefer to think about what we should do. Doing what we should do is so much more difficult. Passionate people help us to do good things.

Because they are so passionate, they are also idealists, thinking that they can fix the world. Sometimes they think they are bringing in the city of God. I've heard Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, moderates, and liberals all talk this way: as if their efforts will finally bring in God's kingdom.

And this is why we have realists. Realists bring us back down to earth. They remind us that people are rooted in sin. We might be able to do a few things, but ultimately we aren't going to "change the world." Our role is to wait for God to change things. We anticipate His kingdom. We can't get wrapped up in thinking that this kingdom is going to get all that much better.

The problem with realists is that they are often complacent. If we can't change the world, then what are we doing? Why bother at all? Let's just keep our heads down and not stir the pot. Nothing I do has any affect anyway. I'm just going to live my life and trust God to do the big stuff.

The world is full of passionate idealists and complacent realists. Incidentally, I'd take a passionate idealist any day of the week over a complacent realist. And if there is something I'm praying for God to grow in me, it's passion. A willingness to get involved, to throw myself into something, to spend myself for the sake of His kingdom.

But the place that God brings us as we mature is to a place of passionate realism. We give ourselves fully to whatever task God has asked us to do, knowing that it is ultimately His work that will make the real difference. How does the Spirit lead us to engage in politics? By making us passionate, energetic, decisive, and bold. But also wise, patient, and spiritually sensitive. With passion for what we can change and with realism for what only God can do.

Conclusion

We are called to be citizens of heaven who live as citizens

of earth. To be *in* the world, not *of* the world. On the one hand, God's purposes are served through government. On the other hand, human government will eventually give way to God's kingdom on earth.

So we walk a fine line. This is where the Spirit leads us. We are led to engage with this world through politics. We are called to vote. To educate ourselves. To work through the channels available to us in order to affect change. The Spirit leads us to become involved in our world, but He also groans within us for the new world to come. The Spirit reminds us that God is at work, that Jesus is coming back, and that He, and only He, will make all things new. So we become passionate realists. Willing to pour ourselves into something, but aware of God's kingdom all the time.

NOTES

¹ *Munich*™ © 2005 Universal Studios, Dreamworks, Amblin Entertainment, Kennedy/Marshall Films. All Rights Reserved.

² "Edict of Toleration," Galerius, 311 A.D., <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/edict-milan.html>

³ "Edict of Milan," A proclamation that permanently established religious toleration for Christianity within the Roman Empire. It was the outcome of a political agreement concluded in Milan between the Roman emperors Constantine I and Licinius in February 313. The proclamation, made for the East by Licinius in June 313, granted all persons freedom to worship whatever deity they pleased, assured Christians of legal rights (including the right to organize churches), and directed the prompt return to Christians of confiscated property. Previous edicts of toleration had been as short-lived as the regimes that sanctioned them, but this time the edict effectively established religious toleration. <http://ancienthistory.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&z=Ti=1&csdn=ancienthistory&cdn=education&tm=24&f=00&tt=8&bt=1&bts=1&zu=http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/milan.stm>

⁴ *The City of God*, St. Augustine of Hippo. 11/13/354 - 8/28/430. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119060/The-City-of-God>